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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 04979

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ACTION: POL  
INFO: RSO AMB PAO DCM MEPI P/M ECON

DISSEMINATION: POL  
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: AMB:MJSISON  
DRAFTED: POL:JFMAYBURY, POL:BT  
CLEARED: DCM:MRQUINN, CG:JLDAVIS

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FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI  
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INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 5633

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 004979

SIPDIS

STATE FOR G/TIP, INL, DRL, NEA/RA AND NEAR/ARPI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/11/2015

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [PREL](#) [PK](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: RIGHTS ACTIVIST ALLEGES CAMEL JOCKEYS TRAIN AT  
NIGHT

REF: ABU DHABI 4903

Classified By: AMBASSADOR MICHELE J. SISON, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Pakistani human rights activist Ansar Burney alleges that underage camel jockeys continue to train after dark in several camel racetracks in at least three of the country's seven emirates. Burney, who plans to be in Washington to meet with G/TIP later this month, told us that he has notified the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in writing of his sightings of underage camel jockeys and that the authorities have not replied. Burney also claims that underage camel jockeys have either been smuggled across the border to Oman and Saudi Arabia or they are being hidden in remote areas. Embassy has asked Burney for additional details and Embassy and CG Dubai have queried the Interior Ministry, Dubai Police, and the Pakistan Embassy. The Interior Ministry replied that the reports were not credible and that police visits to camel farms, which will continue after the racing season begins, have turned up nothing. The Dubai Police assured CG that they would immediately investigate any information regarding the use of children on camel farms. The Embassy of Pakistan indicated it had knowledge that children were still working on the smaller camel farms in the northern Emirates, but almost certainly not in Abu Dhabi. End Summary.

Night Practice Sessions  
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¶2. (C) On December 2, Pol Chief met with Pakistani human rights activist Ansar Burney and his wife, Shaheen, in the lobby of the Abu Dhabi Hilton. The purpose of the meeting was to follow up a series of text messages that Burney had sent to Pol Chief regarding nighttime sightings of underage camel jockeys at camel racetracks in various parts of the UAE

the previous week. Burney claimed to have captured one of the practice races on video, but because the quality was poor he said he did not want to show it to Pol Chief.

13. (C) Burney's son, Fahad, sent the following text message to Pol Chief on November 22 at 7:37 p.m.: "We have witnessed in the last four nights that the use of underage children as child camel jockeys is still going on in night and early morning." After we queried him about where these sightings took place, Ansar Burney replied on November 28 that the children had been seen at racetracks in Al Wathba and an adjacent track in Abu Dhabi Emirate, and in Umm Al Qaiwain Emirate. During the meeting at the Hilton, the Burneys furnished more details about what they had seen. Pol Chief urged them to document their sightings, and also to inform the appropriate government officials and the U.S. Embassy. Ansar Burney said he had sent letters to Interior Minister Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan and to MFA, but had received no replies. He said he would send the Embassy copies of all of his correspondence, although we have yet to receive these.

14. (C) On December 5, three days after the meeting at the Hilton, Ansar Burney sent another text message to Pol Chief. It stated: "Today, me and Shaheen visited Al Khawaneej and Al Usha camps in Dubai and found few underage children on camels in racing tracks." Pol Chief again urged Burney to inform the authorities and to send the Embassy copies of any correspondence. (Note: Embassy has requested copies of this correspondence. End note.)

15. (C) Burney told Pol Chief that during the November 18-21 period, he and his wife and son had gone to camel racetracks in the emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Umm Al Qaiwain after dark to check on reports that underage children were being used to train camels for the upcoming racing season. According to his account, the children's "handlers" (presumably the camel farm owners and their employees) bring the children to the racetrack in SUVs. The children are then mounted on the camels and practice into the night while the SUVs drive alongside the railing illuminating the track with their headlamps. Burney said he witnessed such activity at two racetracks in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (Al Wathba racetrack and a second nearby track), two racetracks in the Emirate of Dubai (Nad Al Shiba racetrack and a track on the road linking Dubai and the Emirate of Sharjah), and a racetrack in the Emirate of Umm Al Qaiwain. (Comment: It is unclear what the motivation would be to train with child jockeys if they will not be allowed to race with them. According to a "Gulf News" interview with prominent camel farm owners, one of the greatest challenges they face is re-training the camels to race with either adult or robot jockeys. Presuming this is true, training with child jockeys would undermine that goal. End Comment.)

16. (U) On November 29, PolOff noted these reports to Colonel Al Seyyar, Director of the Abu Dhabi Social Support Center and national coordinator for the jockey repatriation efforts, who responded by saying the reports are likely not credible. He stated, "The Sheikhs have made it clear that this (use of children) will not be tolerated in the UAE, and I find it difficult to believe that anybody would flout the Sheikhs knowing that everyone is watching." He added that police units have recently been to the camel farms and have not found any children. He said that these visits to the farms will continue after the racing season begins.

17. (U) On November 29, Brigadier General Khamis Al Muzeina of the Dubai Police Criminal Investigations Division (CID) told CG that they had twice been instructed by Mohamed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, to ensure that no farm owners were using children as camel jockeys. The General noted that his CID teams had been to numerous farms early in the summer and had arrested anybody found to be in violation of the edicts regarding child camel jockeys. He added that CID would immediately investigate any information regarding the use of children on camel farms, even if they are only rumors. Buthayna Al Khatib notes that she has traveled throughout several emirates recently and has not seen any

evidence that the use of children on camel farms is continuing.

#### Where Have All the Children Gone?

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¶8. (C) Asked about his earlier estimate of between 7,000 and 8,000 trafficked underage camel jockeys in the UAE, and the discrepancy between his estimate and that of the Ministry of Interior (2,700 underage camel jockeys), Burney replied, "Let's talk about the smaller figure, then we can talk about my estimate." (Note: In June, the Interior Ministry and UNICEF signed an agreement that allowed UNICEF to provide technical assistance to the Ministry to enable it to rescue, document, rehabilitate, and repatriate underage camel jockeys to their respective source countries )- principally Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sudan. The planning figure used in that agreement was 3,000 boy jockeys. End note.) Burney insists that the actual figure was, and is still, higher, and that the children who have not been accounted for were smuggled to neighboring Oman and Saudi Arabia for use in camel races, or were hidden in remote villages and camps )- known as "jungles" in camel racing circles -- presumably for training and racing in other locations. Burney said he stands by his original estimates. He also refuted reports that the majority of the underage camel jockeys are from Pakistan. Based on his experience before March 2005 (Burney told us he spent time in camel farms, "uzbahs", disguised as a laborer), the children were mostly Sudanese and Bangladeshis. Approximately 10 percent of the children were Pakistanis, he contends.

¶9. (C) Burney also said that some child camel jockeys who were repatriated to Pakistan have since returned to the UAE and Oman. "Their parents returned them" to the Gulf, he said. He also claimed that in the midst of the repatriation effort last summer, the Ministry of Interior told some of the boys at the camel jockey rehabilitation shelter located within the Zayed Military City compound that they should return to the "uzbahs" to work. Burney said the Ministry was pressured by camel farm owners, particularly from Dubai, to return the children.

¶10. (U) At a dinner with Emboffs and visiting UAE Desk Officer on December 4, Ashraf Saddiqi, a local activist who has been active in the camel jockey issue since it first rose to prominence in 2004, postulated that there were indeed children still working on the smaller camel farms in the northern Emirates, but almost certainly not in Abu Dhabi emirate, with which Imran Haider, the consular official at the Embassy of Pakistan who has taken the lead on this issue, readily agreed. Saddiqi went on to explain that while he had heard recent reports of children working on camel farms, these reports had turned out to be coming from across the border in Oman. He further added that he had heard rumors that the children who were working on the camel farms were generally children who had been already been repatriated to their home countries and had now returned to the UAE, or were the children of workers who are sponsored by the same employer and were in the UAE with their parents.

#### Robots Not As Dependable As Kids

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¶11. (C) On the issue of robots being used in place of children, Burney said some camel owners complain that the new technology is not as reliable as the children they used to employ. Burney said he found it deplorable that these owners would grumble about their robots falling off the saddle whereas they did not express such feelings when children were involved. One of the owners proclaimed in the "Gulf News" article that his farm would not race a camel with a robot jockey, but that it may take a couple of years before the camels are ready to race with adult jockeys.

#### Use of Child Jockeys Illegal, But Trafficking is Not

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¶12. (U) The law banning the use of underage camel jockeys that was passed in July 2005 only prohibits "persons who are less than 18 years old ... from participating in camel races." The law does not address the use of child labor in the camel racing industry, nor trafficking in any form. However, existing labor laws prohibit the employment of children under the age of 15, and the UAEG does not issue work permits for any person under the age of 18. A more general law that addresses all forms of trafficking is reportedly being drafted within the Ministries of Labor and Justice.

Comment:

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¶13. (C) Ministry of Interior officials have told us repeatedly that Ansar Burney purposely exaggerates his claims to draw attention to his NGO's activities. Our assessment is that estimating the number of underage camel jockeys in the UAE or Gulf-wide is a difficult task. The children are scattered across "uzbahs" in sometimes remote places. The reports that there might still be some attempts to continue using underage boys for practice runs at night are disturbing, but not surprising. This appears to us to be predictable behavior on the part of determined -) and unscrupulous -- camel farm owners and die-hard racing devotees who want to perpetuate their sport even if it means placing the children at even greater risk by racing them at night. We intend to follow up vigorously with our law enforcement contacts to share the information that Ansar Burney has provided, and we are going to visit the camel racetracks where underage children have been sighted.  
SISON